

John James Audubon (1785-1851)

Source: <http://www.audubon.org/john-james-audubon>

Audubon was born in Saint Domingue (now Haiti), the illegitimate son of a French sea captain and plantation owner and his French mistress. Early on, he was raised by his stepmother, Mrs. Audubon, in Nantes, France, and took a lively interest in birds, nature, drawing, and music. In 1803, at the age of 18, he was sent to America, in part to escape conscription into the Emperor Napoleon's army. He lived on the family-owned estate at Mill Grove, near Philadelphia, where he hunted, studied and drew birds, and met his wife, Lucy Bakewell. While there, he conducted the first known bird-banding experiment in North America, tying strings around the legs of Eastern Phoebes; he learned that the birds returned to the very same nesting sites each year.

Audubon spent more than a decade in business, eventually traveling down the Ohio River to western Kentucky - then the frontier - and setting up a dry-goods store in Henderson. He continued to draw birds as a hobby, amassing an impressive portfolio. While in Kentucky, Lucy gave birth to two sons, Victor Gifford and John Woodhouse, as well as a daughter who died in infancy. Audubon was quite successful in business for a while, but hard times hit, and in 1819 he was briefly jailed for bankruptcy.

With no other prospects, Audubon set off on his epic quest to depict America's avifauna, with nothing but his gun, artist's materials, and a young assistant. Floating down the Mississippi, he lived a rugged hand-to-mouth existence in the South while Lucy earned money as a tutor to wealthy plantation families. In 1826 he sailed with his partly finished collection to England. "The American Woodsman" was literally an overnight success. His life-size, highly dramatic bird portraits, along with his embellished descriptions of wilderness life, hit just the right note at the height of the Continent's Romantic era. Audubon found a printer for the *Birds of America*, first in Edinburgh, then London, and later collaborated with the Scottish ornithologist William MacGillivray on the *Ornithological Biographies* - life histories of each of the species in the work.

The last print was issued in 1838, by which time Audubon had achieved fame and a modest degree of comfort, traveled this country several more times in search of birds, and settled in New York City. He made one more trip out West in 1843, the basis for his final work of mammals, the *Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, which was largely completed by his sons and the text of which was written by his long-time friend, the Lutheran pastor John Bachman (whose daughters married Audubon's sons). Audubon spent his last years in senility and died at age 65. He is buried in the Trinity Cemetery at 155th Street and Broadway in New York City.

Like his peers, he was an avid hunter, and he also had a deep appreciation and concern for conservation; in his later writings he sounded the alarm about destruction of birds and habitats.

Discussion Questions

American Flamingo
John James Audubon

- The name of this print is American Flamingo. Why do you think it is named that?
- What is in the background of this print? What do you think a flamingo might eat?
- Show me how a flamingo might move.
- How is this print of the flamingo like a photograph? (It is an accurate drawing of a real bird.)
- What season do you think it is? What kind of weather do you think flamingos live in?
- Are there other things you would like to tell me about this print or about flamingos?

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES TO ACCOMPANY

American Flamingo

John James Audubon - Kindergarten

1. Water Environment Picture

Materials: newsprint or drawing paper, crayons, chalk or paint

Discuss the environment where flamingos live. On a chart, list reasons why water is important to people, birds, and animals. Have children draw a picture of their favorite water activity.

2. Recording using pictures

Materials: newsprint or drawing paper, crayons, chalk or paint
Various items from outside or around the classroom

Discuss the fact that Mr. Audubon painted pictures of birds and animals because there were no cameras yet to take photographs. Let the students pretend they are living before cameras and let them “record” something so that others would know what it looks like. They could draw and color items from the classroom or items from nature that are brought in. Let them decide what would be important to tell other people about.

3. Collage

Materials: magazines, newspapers, photos; butcher paper for mural

Make a group collage or an “animal wall” using magazines, newspapers, or photos of environments similar to the children’s neighborhoods. Find pictures of small animals and birds that live in their neighborhoods.